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PowerBrowser. (Oracle Corp)(one of 13 evaluations of World Wide Web browsers in "Just Browsing: Internet Access") (Software Review)(Evaluation)(Cover Story)

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Abstract: Oracle Corp's 32-bit PowerBrowser, distributed as freeware, is a rough beta release that suffers from some problems and bugs but offers interesting potential. It includes graphical HTML authoring tools, a personal HTTP server, local SQL-complaint data store and Java and Visual Basic interpreters that make it ideal for corporate intranets. The browser component is HTML 2.0-compatible and offers both fairly complete features and an attractive interface. It runs as an MDI application; the parent window contains only basic menus and a navigation toolbar, and the browser itself runs in a child window. Users can launch multiple browser sessions in different windows, and navigation is made easy by the collapsible tree hierarchy of bookmarks. Version 1.0 is scheduled to support frames and other next-generation HTML features, but these are not present in the beta.

Text:

Consider it a work in progress. The 32-bit beta release of Oracle PowerBrowser we tested was rough, even by the lenient standards of the Web. But if you look past the problems we encountered, PowerBrowser offers an intriguing concept. As the name suggests, it's a Web browser, but PowerBrowser also includes a personal HTTP server, graphical HTML page-creation tools, a local SQL-compliant data store, and language interpreters for executing Java or Microsoft Visual Basic for Applications (VBA) programs. The combination, targeted at intranets, can turn any workstation into a Web content provider and a true client in Web-based client/server applications.

These ambitious plans still have a way to go, however. The beta we tested was bedeviled by missing features, performance problems, and annoying bugs. Oracle has its work cut out in order to meet its target of a feature-complete release in the first quarter of 1996. When ready, the release will be available for free on the Web. Microsoft Corp. has licensed an OLE custom control (OCX) version of PowerBrowser for use with Microsoft Visual Basic.

The HTML 2.0-compliant browser component offers an attractive interface and a reasonably complete set of basic features. Integrated extras include e-mail, a newsreader, and FTP. Integrated multimedia support is limited to .AVI files.

The browser component is a multiple-document interface (MDI) application where the parent window contains only basic application menus and a navigation toolbar. The actual browser runs in a child window and you can launch multiple children, each containing an independent browsing session. Each browser window contains three panes: a large viewing window

where Web documents are displayed, a bookmark pane, and a history pane. It is easy to resize or hide these panes by simply dragging their borders.

Bookmarks are displayed in an expandable/collapsible tree hierarchy organized under a series of books. Each bookmark is automatically titled and marked by an icon indicating the type of object it points to (an HTML, graphic, or multimedia file, for example). You can edit the names of books and individual bookmarks, drag and drop entries from one book to another, and nest books within other books. The history pane shows a sequential list of the pages you've visited, with auto-generated titles if a title tag was present on the page.

Additional creature comforts include tooltips and a smart command line that guesses at partial URLs. Right-mouse-activated context menus provide useful options including the ability to open a link in a separate window. The cache is efficient, highly tunable, and offers both Clear and Disable options.

Basic setup requires nothing more than a button click but some components, including mail, newsgroups, and helper application, were painfully difficult to configure. Oracle plans to revamp these portions of the interface before the final release.

A number of features slated for the 1.0 release were not present in the beta we saw, including frames support, uninstall, and the Java and VBA language engines. The Personal Server component was functional but neither the Personal Publisher HTML authoring tool nor the page-creation wizards were available for testing. The local data store (which will probably be Oracle's Blaze database) was not present either. Oracle plans VRML support and additional video formats for release 1.1.

Despite its blemishes, Oracle's nascent PowerBrowser is well worth watching. The browser component by itself is attractive, and the integration of browser, server, client-side language engines, authoring tools, and an SQL database into a single package promises to be powerful combination.

PowerBrowser 0.9B. List price: Free. Oracle Corp., Redwood Shores, CA; 800-672-2531; <http://www.oracle.com>.

Suitability to Task

PowerBrowser

	Power	Ease
Setup and installation	Good	Fair
Navigation	Good	Excellent
Complex viewing	Fair	Fair
Multimedia	Fair	Excellent
E-mail, FTP, news	N/A	N/A
N/A--Not applicable: These features were not fully functional in the tested beta.		

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